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ABSTRACT

If adult education programs are to be successful, they must be relevant to the needs of their intended target audience and must have the potential to affect the status quo of Latin American women. In addition, these programs can be significantly enhanced by the effective operation of a distance education system. Apathy, lack of knowledge, and empathy, linked to the idea that the professional elites know what is best for the rest of the population, have been responsible for adult education programs that have produced frustration and, in some cases, resistance by the Latin American adult. Only to the extent that the activities offered by the adult education programs are important and relevant to the individual will the person continue to actively participate in them and encourage others to do likewise. Currently in Latin America, there are very often great differences in those adult education programs offered to women and those offered to men. So that women can become active participants in society, adult education programs which promote the social and economic participation of women should be implemented. Distance education--education via radio, television, etc.--is worth considering in Latin America because it is flexible and it has potential for reaching large sectors of the population. (RM)

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CHANGING THE ROLE OF ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN LATIN AMERICA

by

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The purpose of this paper is to discuss some of the social implications of adult education programs in Latin America. It concentrates on three aspects which I consider crucial for understanding the social impact of those programs in the region. These aspects are: a) the role of relevance and the significance that participation in adult education activities may have for the individual, b) how these activities and programs have affected the status quo of women in those societies and c) how the coverage and influence of these programs can be significantly enhanced by the effective operation of a distance education system.

Before attempting to delve directly into the ideas related to these three aspects, I think that it is important to point out that in Latin America as a rule, adult education has not been given the attention it deserves. This is despite the fact that it is a region with pressing educational needs and insufficient human and material infrastructure. Large sectors of the population are not served by the formal educational system during the so-called school years, and many become permanently left out to increase the ranks of those not properly schooled or in many cases not schooled at all.

In most of the Latin American countries the definition of adults for the adult education programs is those persons over 15 years of age and there is a large and ever increasing number of individuals who are not being reached. It might seem logical to put emphasis on the development of more non traditional or non-formal educational programs since it is well known that despite the notable increase on enrollment over the last two decades, access to education is still not universal and the drop out rate continues to be consistently high. Furthermore, if there is any hope of attaining a reasonable level of socio-economic development, and a population with awareness of its potential, a condition which has been achieved by very few countries, education seems to be a key element for reaching toward this condition. Education may be a powerful tool for achieving these aims, especially if it helps to increase a

population's awareness about the role they may constructively play in society and of the consequences that social change may have upon their lives, not to mention one which tends to be directed to the acquisition of special needed skills. Education as various sociologists, adherents of different philosophical schools (Paulston, 1976; Larkin, 1970), have pointed out can not be realistically viewed as separate from the rest of the social system under study. Since adult education is basically in touch with the realities of work, it may fulfill an important integrative role.

In the last two decades in Latin America the greatest educational emphasis has been placed on the development of the formal sector of education. It is not until the eighties under the aegis of international agencies such as the World Bank that the emphasis began to shift to a "basic needs model" in which formal education was seen as less important (Simmons, 1980). In that way tacit recognition has been given that a good part of the resources poured into that sector in the preceding decades had been wasted. During the sixties and seventies man power planning had focused on the construction of more schools, the hiring of more teachers, teacher training and the like, while the efforts related to on the job training for persons in the needed professions and the "recycling" of individuals did not receive anything like the same measure of support.

Some authors such as Torres (1982) have postulated that the lack of importance given to the adult education programs is due to a great extent to the relatively minor political significance of these groups. According to this position most resources have been allocated to those sectors of the Latin American society that can exert pressure upon the educational system such as the university students, or by influential parents who exercise that pressure on behalf of their school age children. The first situation is illustrated by the difficulty that some Latin American Ministries of Education have experienced in levying tuition payment from the users of the public universities, even

though this measure would probably be economically sound in the face of shrinking national resources. The complexity of the problem is further demonstrated by the conviction and acceptance expressed by some adults (Pinto, 1982) that educational-work opportunities are now non-existent for themselves on account of their age, etc. but that they feel compelled to seek to provide opportunities for their children, even though their children's chances of succeeding are slim as well. For this and many other reasons, such as the belief that adult educational activities are not as good or important as those related to those of school-aged groups mentioned before, the possible impact of the adult education programs has been severely limited. With this idea in mind I proceed with the consideration of the three aspects to be discussed in this paper.

The impact or significance that participation in adult education activities may have for the individual is treated first since I consider that this is the most important issue and influences the operation of the other two.

By impact I understand, the usefulness or meaning that these activities have for the person. This is an idea that others would probably choose to express in motivational terms. This concept is deemed important since without a proper process of internalization that makes the involvement in educational activities relevant and meaningful no significant social impact can be obtained from the operation of this type of programs (Pinto, 1982). If such a state of involvement is not attained then the adult education programs are seen as external to the individual, they will be something undertaken at best because work necessitates them and at worst, they will be rejected as an intolerable imposition. In any cases the person who is deemed target of these activities must consider them his own to a reasonable extent in order for them to make a social impact on him.

Freire (1971, 1973) when introducing his concept of consciousness was raising this issue. His main contribution, in my opinion, has been to indicate that without the involvement of the participants in these programs little success is achieved. His use of generating words makes very good sense if we understand them as a medium to help put the individual in contact with his reality and to raise the level of awareness vis-a-vis his situation (Arnove, 1981). The criticism that his generative words have been used politically in the literacy campaigns of North Eastern Brazil and Nicaragua, may be counteracted by saying that if the situations in those societies had not been as they were that these words served as a catalyst for raising awareness, then their political impact would have been limited. The fact is however, that if we consider that there is an inherent value in the fact that the individual has to know his reality if he actively wants to modify it and himself, then contact with it is imperative even though that will entail seeing the injustices of the social system. Destructive or constructive criticism and action will depend on the nature and ends sought and those fostered through the dialog of the process.

Besides the obvious instances in which there is manipulation from the ruling groups through adult education campaigns, or the absence of them, in most cases the lack of personal relevance for the participants stems from other sources. One reason is that the campaigns are conceived, planned and implemented by formal educational functionaries that are not in touch with the realities of life of the rural or urban populations for which the programs are intended. Apathy, lack of knowledge and empathy, linked to the idea that the professional elites know what is best for the rest of the population have been responsible for programs that have produced frustration and in some cases resistance by the intended target populations. Building on tradition the folkways and ideas of a culture can be used to help to integrate a people or help

them decide how to integrate the old with the new ideas, or to obtain a synthesis that can only be arrived at by contact with the reality and a true dialog.

Only to the extent that the activities offered by the adult education programs are important and relevant to the individual will the person continue to actively participate in them and encourage others to do likewise. In Latin America the literature that reports the failure of the continuation of educational skills such as that of literacy is abundant with examples of failure (Montoya, 1982; Larrain, 1969). It is evident that for the permanent adoption of the educational skills to be assured it will be necessary to incorporate the needs of the target population and research how these needs can best be served through the operation of the adult education programs. This will not be easy if the planners, who are members of the ruling elites with middle class biases, do not attain a good degree of humility and consider that there are limitations to their wisdom, that there might be ethical problems with playing god and that persons no matter how illiterate or uneducated they might be have the right to participate in the decisions that affect their everyday lives.

I think that the peasant who sees that the education that is transmitted throughout the schools to his children, that in many instances places undue importance on the values other than his and that these are intended to be passed to him through non-formal education as well, acts very rationally when he refuses to participate in these programs. The same can be said about the urban-dwelling post peasants of the different "belts of misery" that surround many Latin American cities. When a would be adult student is confronted with adult education programs that seem to be irrelevant to him, which do not respect the knowledge that he already has nor his experience, for him they may justly be described as a waste of time.

The solution to this dilemma is complex since it involves changes in the attitudes and pre-conceptions of people, and because there is always the apprehension that by

elevating the level of consciousness of the populace one may be opening a high risk political pandora's box. Despite this inherent risk, the fact remains that without an acceptable level of involvement the success of the programs is severely impaired and the non traditional learner will be forced to look for information elsewhere.

The second aspect that I want to mention in this paper is that of the consequences that properly implemented adult education programs may have on the role that women have traditionally played in the Latin American societies. I think that the study of the possible influence that these programs might have on such an important sector of the population has been neglected with respect to the consideration of the potential social impact of these programs.

The participation of women in all aspects of Latin American life has without a doubt increased in the last decades, but it can still be further improved. There are norms and mores that serve to preserve very distinct social and economic roles for the female sector of the population that need to be addressed and considered if real participation of women is to be accomplished.

In the particular case of the adult education programs one situation that has to be considered in this regard is that there are very often great differences in those programs offered to the women vis-a-vis those offered to the men. The female programs tend more toward home economics, manual arts, ceramics and similar activities while those of their male counterparts are more directed toward more productive sectors of the economy. I will not argue against the idea that because of their child bearing capacity and other biological and social circumstances there probably is more interest among women toward more domestic types of activities, what is unreasonable is that for many adult education programs those are basically the only options that women have. I want however to add a word of caution. In some societies where women have been forced into the productive sector or become

interested in traditionally non female activities, some of them have altered or at times even neglected child rearing and home economics roles. Without a doubt women fulfill a very valuable economic and social function in those activities which if anything need to be done more efficiently or with tasks shared differently. It may be necessary furthermore to establish that these tasks are not necessarily the exclusive realm of women since men can also contribute to improving efficiency if this is a desirable goal. Women are often apt psychologically and physically equipped to work in occupations that had been considered as exclusively male.

As expressed earlier I think that this aspect has a close relationship to that of becoming aware of one's own situation. It may very well be that this situation presents itself because it has been accepted as the norm and therefore for women to become more involved in the formal productive sector of the economy has not yet been expressed.

The fact is, however, that the role of the female in Latin American societies is extremely important although it has not often been properly recognized yet. The statistics show that in most countries the households are headed by women, and through their work the material and emotional well-being of many of the fatherless households is achieved. The women in many cases provide the main source of emotional support for their families even when the father is present. Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1983: p.178) has poetically summed up this idea in the following way: "For me, it is very clear that women hold up the world . . . women are concerned with daily reality, while men go around doing all sorts of crazy things . . . they stay at home, run the house, bake animal candies--so that the men can go off and make wars."

The above statement is not meant to idealize the role of women, something that some Latin American authors call marianismo, but just to help to see it in its proper dimension and contribute to getting away from the idea that in Latin American

societies women are just passive individuals who are at the mercy of men and can not participate in the socio-economic activities of their societies in any significant manner.

The implementation of adult education programs in which the social and economic participation of women is enhanced, and getting closer to realizing some of their potentials in many aspects of their lives is attained, is particular relevant in the decade of the 1980's which has been declared the Decade of the Woman by the UNESCO conference of Copenhagen. The incorporation of the woman as an active participant is an absolute necessity in Latin America, and properly implemented adult education programs can be very helpful in assuring that this goal is obtained.

Finally, the last aspect that will be discussed in this paper is how an effective system of distance education can be useful for the implementation of adult education programs which serve to attain the general goals mentioned before.

It is my thesis that the possibilities of distance education program for adult education have not yet been explored in the Latin American region. It is true that there have been experiences in many countries such as radio schools in Colombia and Ecuador, and television campaigns in El Salvador but in general the technologies associated with this educational mode have not been widely used to teach adults. In the region at the present time there are universities that teach at a distance in Venezuela and Costa Rica, and programs used to train special groups at a distance such as that of science teachers in Argentina but what is lacking is making these experiences available for the educational coverage of large numbers of adults.

Perhaps it is premature to think that the development of highly efficient educational systems at a distance is now a reality in Latin America, but undoubtedly the discipline is moving in that direction. For one a noted interest is sensed in the region regarding the development and the technical aspects of such systems, and for

another the economical and geographical limitations of the region makes that such an educational technology be feasible if proper coverage is to be insured at reasonable costs. The variable cost seems to be a very important consideration when the economies of all of the countries are going through critical financial limitations. The fact that some of the distance education programs that were experimented with in the past, and some of those operating today have not been judged as cost effective is not in itself a reason for the dismissal of distance education as a reasonable option, since the problem of cost is one that can be solved by using the technically appropriate methodology and more sophisticated tools for evaluation of quality and expenses.

The main reason that makes this technological innovation worth considering is its flexibility and its potential for reaching large sectors of the population. By the flexibility of distance education is understood its capacity to be molded to the circumstances of the target population. By this I mean that the system used to deliver the educational message can be implemented via the written module, audio or video cassettes or television and the amount of necessary human contact with the instructors can be flexibly arranged. Experience has indicated that the main drawback of the system is its impersonality and its lack of an effective system of feedback, for that some human association with live instructors is an absolute necessity, the degree of that association needs however to be assessed from situation to situation. In the cases of programs dealing with emotionally laden issues such as those of awareness mentioned before, the contact with facilitators in small groups sessions is a must, but that situation does not preclude the use of messages transmitted through the media that then can be discussed in those small groups; later feedback can be sent to the sources of the media messages that can serve to inform their designers about how the message has been received and interpreted (Rogers, 1973).

The flexibility of distance education serves very well in that it does not have to be restricted to any one level of education, it can impart formal, non-formal or primary and secondary, etc. A person can receive as much or as little information as needed, and the same can be supplemented through the use of human mediation either on a one to one basis or through the operation of the groups.

It is imperative that adult education not be considered, the somewhat backward stepsister of formal education that some professional educators and planners have thought to be, as seen in both their ideas and their actions about it. On the contrary, this type of education can be a catalyst to serve very useful purposes for the Latin American societies, including important groups such as women that traditionally have been out of the mainstream with regard to educational and occupational opportunities.

In spite of the undeniable advancements in the state of education in Latin American societies, it is a fact that large sectors of the population are still not educated, or when they are educated, their education is not put to optimal use. In the case of women, their level of education has also increased, but in many instances a full integration has not been achieved. This fact is highlighted by the circumstance that in most countries women tend to be less educated than men and in others the occupations traditionally female have a lower occupational status.

Distance education has been proposed as a manner to efficiently provide education to large sectors of the Latin American adult population. The techniques associated with this education mode do not necessarily have to be used in an exclusive manner but they can be used in combination with other forms of educational techniques. If properly utilized, distance education modalities can provide an opportunity for the adults to know more about their particular situation, to get in touch with their reality and to raise their general level of awareness; situation that is considered essential for the proper operation of adult education programs.

It is my idea that if adult education is conceived in its true importance, and its possibilities to enact social change are properly recognized then we will be seeing some changes in the discipline. For one thing it will attract a greater cadre of bright professionals who are able to go beyond the restrictions that some of the Latin American practitioners have today, and the consequence could very well be that as the programs show a greater impact there will be an upgrading of the activity.

In order, however, for adult education programs to have a serious impact it is probably necessary for the professionals involved to stay away from models that do not take into account the realities of the target populations and do not respect their previous achievements and knowledge. One of the basic limitation of the models used by adult educators, both foreign and natives, is that they have tried to impose a particular way of life from the top of the society that does not necessarily correspond to that that the people really want or need. For change to have meaning it probably has to come from within because when it comes from without whatever adoption that is produced is often shortlived and artificial. We have to keep in mind that because what we transmit through the operation of these programs are basically innovations, if we do not take these circumstances into account the social implications of them are in jeopardy and the effects may even be contrary to what was originally intended.

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